



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

## The Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

September 23, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

### Today's Themes in Scripture

The First Reading presents a picture of the “Just One” of God. This description from Wisdom is reminiscent of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, heard in last week’s First Reading. The Book of Wisdom was composed in Alexandria, the intellectual center of the Greek world. It was written to support the Jewish community there, whose members were under constant threat of being assimilated into the culture around them. Wisdom offered a strong Jewish counterpoint to the philosophy and religion of the Greeks. In today’s passage, the writer seems to be meditating on the Suffering Servant—one so committed to God that he resists every test of the wicked, including mockery, assault, torture, and death. Like the Suffering Servant, the Just One serves God’s will, trusting he will be his help and deliverer.

In the Gospel, Jesus makes a second prediction of his Passion. Jesus took advantage of a private journey with the disciples to teach them about his coming suffering. Many scholars believe that Jesus patterned his understanding of his role on the Suffering Servant. Like the Just One, Jesus accepted suffering because he was focused on the will of his Father. Jesus tried to explain this to his disciples but again, they did not understand. They were frightened by Jesus’ words and could not ask him what he meant.

To distract themselves from thinking about Jesus’ suffering and death, the disciples began to debate who among themselves would be the greatest. Later, when Jesus asked them about this, they could not answer him. Jesus - the one whom Peter had earlier confessed to be the Christ - had spoken of suffering and his disciples responded with fantasies about greatness. Jesus seemed to know where their human understanding and desires had taken them, so he used their debate about being the greatest to teach them how to become the greatest.

Jesus took a child in his arms. In Aramaic, the word for child and servant is the same. Using a word play to make his point, Jesus said that the one who wants to be greatest must be willing to serve those who are lowly like a child: vulnerable, powerless, totally without status, dependent on the concern, care, and protection of others. According to Jesus, the path to greatness is found in putting aside all judgement and desire for greatness, making one willing to become a servant to the servant.

### Sunday Readings and Background

#### Reading I: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

##### God will take care of him.

- The poetry of the Book of Wisdom was written for Jews suffering persecution.
- The just individual is persecuted by the wicked for trying to live faithfully to God's law.
- The first reading complements today’s Gospel in which Jesus tells of his own suffering and death.

#### Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 54: 3-4, 5, 6-8

##### The Lord upholds my life.

#### Reading II: James 3:16-4:3

##### Where does conflict among you originate?

- James is very clear about the qualities that we can use to judge the source of a person's wisdom.
- Jealousy and disorder are not in accord with God's righteousness.
- James describes the proper conduct of those who try to live in accord with God's ways.

#### Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

##### All who wish to be first must make themselves the servants of all.

- Today's Gospel begins with Jesus foretelling his suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples do not understand.
- Then Jesus sits down to teach about serving others.
- Jesus welcomes a child into his arms to teach the disciples that to rank first, one must be the last of all.

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# The Victory of the Servant

Most average people in the U.S. don't think of themselves as having servants. That's because it's so easy to forget about the grocery store clerks and the janitors, not to mention the workers who harvest our strawberries and fill the potholes on our roads. We have lots of servants, but since we don't usually hire them directly, we rarely take note of them the way the lords of Downton Abbey did of Mr. Carson, their butler. But from what we've heard for the past couple of weeks, Jesus thought a fair amount about servants and how he was called to be one.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus made a point of walking the road with just his disciples so that he could have an intimate conversation with them. Knowing their expectations for greatness, he explained for a second time that he was going to be betrayed, killed and then rise to new life. His companions responded with blessed silence. No questions, no sympathy, no protest. Perhaps they were just shaking their heads in hopes that he'd come to his senses when they finally sat down in the shade. Once he was out of hearing distance, they got into a lively discussion of their own.

The scene when they arrived at their destination must have been interesting. When Jesus asked what they had been arguing about along the way, they again took refuge in silence. So once more, Jesus tried to explain himself.

When he had told them that he would be taken by force but would not respond in kind, they were reduced to silence. He tried to explain his reasoning. Everything he did was part of his project of making God's kingdom of justice, peace and well-being present among them. None of it was for his own glory, but rather for the good of everyone concerned. (That is one reason for telling them not to talk about it.) If he had wanted fame and fortune, wouldn't he have been better off catering to the powerful? Instead, the powerful were precisely the ones who were threatened by him and his attention to the outcasts and unnoticed.

Jesus was telling the disciples: "If you want to be great, look to God who has handed creation over to mere human beings. Think about it! Who is most important in society? Do emperors, generals and religious leaders surpass the importance of mothers? Whose role is truly indispensable — not to mention life-giving?"

Jesus' disciples loved him, but they didn't understand him. His way of thinking was just too different. So, when words didn't suffice, he picked up a child to show his argumentative disciples what it looks like to be in first place in the reign of God.

What was he trying to teach them as he put his arms around the child? Perhaps that like the child, they had been chosen not for their importance or even their potential, but because they were loved. Their mission was not to perform mighty works, but to receive the little ones, the needy, the forgotten and the rejected. Their mission was to share the love they had been given so freely. They were called to the humble, humbling service of embracing the little people just as Jesus did.

When Jesus picked up the child, he was performing a living parable, teaching that loving someone is the greatest service you can do them; everything else flows from that and nothing else is very valuable without it. Loving is also the greatest service we can do for the entire world because the more people are loved, the less they need to compete and use violence to make their mark.

Jesus' faith in the mission God gave him was what made him so different from the rest. It made him both incredibly attractive and impossible to understand in a theoretical way. Jesus knew in his bones that love is more powerful than violence. Thus, no matter how horrific the violence that would be done to him, he knew it would not overcome him. That's why Jesus never spoke of the passion without the resurrection: They were one and interwoven. The resurrection was the final defeat of oppression and violence. It was the victory of the little ones, the victory of the servant.

To get to the resurrection, Jesus had to pass through the shoals of death. He had to trust love to carry him all the way through. It was Jesus' faith and vulnerability that allowed God to raise him. No theory is sufficient. But the word of the Lord is that no practice will fail.

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